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ABSTRACT

The performance and attitudes of African-American students of foreign languages are discussed in this digest. Three major areas are reported: (1) Black English and foreign language learning, including theories of language deficiency, sociolinguistic research, phonology and syntax; (2) research on the performance of African-American students of foreign languages; and (3) research on the attitudes of African-American students of foreign languages. It is concluded that at one time claims were made that the African-American student did not see any benefit or relevance in the study of a foreign language, but that over the past 20 years there has been a shift in the affective component of the African-American attitude toward foreign language study. In the classroom setting, the phenomenon of "anomie," a feeling of estrangement from one's own culture, can be dissipated through the conscientious inclusion of instructional materials focusing on the contributions of members of one's own cultural heritage. Contains 27 references. (LB)

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Eric Digest

African American Students and Foreign Language Learning

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Digest

May 1992

African-American Students and Foreign Language Learning

(EDO-FL-91-08)

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Relatively few studies have focused on the performance and attitudes of African-American students in foreign language programs. Almost 40 years ago, Miller (1953) pointed out that, during a period of 35 years prior to his study, there had been only four scholarly studies on the topic and only two of those dealt with student performance and evaluation. From 1940 to 1991, there were six studies--Nyabongo, 1946; Miller, 1953; LeBlanc, 1972; Clowney & Legge, 1979; Clark & Harty, 1983; Davis & Markham, 1991--that focused on some issue related to African-American students' perceived needs, performance, and attitudes toward foreign language study.

Black English and Foreign Language Learning

Before focusing on the attitudes and performance of African-American students learning foreign languages, it is important to discuss what has been called "Black English" and some of its implications. Some researchers (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966) have posited that African Americans, principally those from "culturally disadvantaged" environments, are linguistically deficient. According to the deficit theory (Dummett, 1984), the language spoken by these African-American students is undeveloped and unstructured. The theory further posits that because of their language deficiency, speakers of Black English suffer a cognitive deficiency that renders them unable to excel in the study of Standard English and other academic subjects (Orr, 1987). In fact, at one time, there were proposals in this country to teach Standard English as a foreign language to speakers of Black English or to teach the culturally deprived African-American student using Black English.

During the past twenty years, however, the field of sociolinguistics has made great strides in combatting the deficit theory. Research on the phonology and syntax of Black English has convincingly concluded that Black English is a well structured and systematic language (Dillard, 1975). Moreover, the use of Black English does not interfere with a person's ability to excel in any academic endeavor if the proper instruction and learning environment are provided. Sociolinguists and language educators (DeStefano, 1971; Dummett, 1984; Ford, 1978; Miller, 1953; Taylor, 1973) argued that the attitudes of teachers toward Black English contributed significantly to the academic failure of many African-American students who had to deal with instructional materials in Standard English. Miller (1953), for example, in a study on the teaching and learning of foreign languages in historically Black colleges and universities, concluded that many foreign language teachers felt their students suffered from certain communication handicaps that interfered with their ability to learn a foreign language.

Research on the Performance of African-American Students of Foreign Languages

Prior to 1940, studies of African Americans and foreign language learning (Cook, 1938; Matheus, 1938; Perez, 1938; Rivers, 1933) investigated program offerings, teacher preparation, methodology, and funding available to foreign language programs. The overwhelming results revealed inadequacies in all areas investigated. Research regarding the achievement of African-American students in foreign languages has generally indicated that they do not perform as well as their counterparts from other ethnic groups. Using standardized examinations, Worthington and Carter (1941) and Nyabongo (1946) compared the overall academic achievement of foreign language students at Black colleges and universities with the overall academic achievement of foreign language students at other institutions. In both studies, the scores of students from the Black colleges and universities were lower than the national average. More recently, Brigman and Jacobs (1981) studied the foreign language achievement of African-American students at Indiana University. They concluded that while African Americans were taking as many foreign language courses as other students, they were not performing as well. It should be noted that the achievement levels reported in the studies cited above were not attributed to student ability or special problems in learning a foreign language.

Research on the Attitudes of African-American Students of Foreign Languages

In the past twenty years, there have been three published studies (LeBlanc, 1972; Clowney & Legge, 1979; Davis & Markham, 1991) on the attitudes of African-American students toward the study of foreign languages and cultures. Data revealed overall positive attitudes. Compared to LeBlanc's 1972 study, in which 64% of the students polled felt that foreign language should be deleted from their requirements for graduation, Davis and Markham reported in 1991 that only 22.5% of the students surveyed expressed that desire. Also, Davis and Markham reported that only 6% of the students felt that their own cultural identities were threatened by an intense commitment to the study of another language and culture. This is compared to 57% in the Clowney & Legge study.

To develop more positive attitudes toward foreign language study among African-American students, researchers have suggested that curriculum materials must be appealing, appropriate, and relevant (Clark, 1980, 1982; Cook, 1938; Dathorne, 1974; DeCosta, 1972; LeBlanc, 1972). Clark, for example, wrote that "Black students in elementary language courses often show indifference toward the cultural content of textbooks that do not seem to be attractive or relevant to them" (p.23). Clowney and Legge concluded that this "is related to black students' desire to study first those languages and literatures most closely related to the Afro-American experience. The inclusion of materials written by black authors in the target language might help to mitigate this feeling" (p.264). In North American foreign language classrooms, comparable attention has not traditionally been given to African cultural contributions.

Essentially, the concerns expressed by African-American

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students about foreign language study and learning are similar to those of other ethnic groups. They are concerned about aspects of the institutional program and methodologies employed by their instructors. Most frequent among the items about which they expressed dissatisfaction were lack of time to learn the language adequately, lack of opportunity to use the target language, lack of study abroad opportunities, not enough emphasis on cultural study, and the requirement of foreign language study for graduation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

At one time, claims were made that the African-American student generally did not see any benefit or relevance in the study of a foreign language (Hubbard, 1968). As Hubbard (1975) pointed out, however, there were no differences between the attitudes of African-American students and other North American ethnic student groups. Hubbard further stated that "Black students in the past were usually counseled out of the foreign language field with the reasoning that the subject would be too difficult and that they would never need it. As the choice today becomes theirs to make, black students become a part of mainstream America that sees no benefits in academic study of a foreign language" (p.563).

Over the past two decades, however, research has revealed a shift in the affective component of the African-American attitude toward foreign language study. Davis and Markham's study, in contrast to the LeBlanc study and the Clowney and Legge study, indicated that African-American students were more aware of the practical and intrinsic values of foreign language study than they had been several years earlier. This shift in attitude may be partially explained by historical and social events. The students of the late 1980s are the offspring of parents who grew up during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, which stressed the equality of all human beings. Perhaps due to parental and social influences, many of today's African-American students are more aware of and more prone to think in terms of the equality of their race, especially as it relates to their educational experiences. While many argue that today's college students, with some exceptions, are often more concerned about their own economic and social status than about political and social issues, the African-American student is generally interested in learning about and interpreting African-American history, culture, and social issues.

It is also true that many African-American students find greater relevancy in foreign language study when the concept of "Negritude," an effort to influence the awareness of their African heritage, is introduced and explored. With regard to the classroom setting, it has been further suggested that the phenomenon of "anomie," a feeling of estrangement from one's own culture, can be dissipated through the conscientious inclusion of instructional materials focusing on the contributions of members of one's own cultural heritage.

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